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ABSTRACT

American expatriates, particularly those in business who are assigned abroad, often learn very little of the language and culture of the countries to which they are assigned. Some explanations of this phenomenon are offered based on observation of two U.S. communities in Tripoli, Libya, and Medan (Sumatra) from 1965 to 1973. First, the needs for learning the foreign language are minimal, and secondly, certain structures are imposed by the rules of the expatriate community, which constitutes a sub-culture of American society. Certain factors operate to maintain the sub-culture, such as (1) temporary residence status, (2) creation and maintenance of American institutions, (3) the extent of social and business contacts between the Americans and the host country nationals, (4) variation in usage of pidginized and standard English, and (5) differences in the influence of the local language on the language used by hosts to communicate with Americans. One reason for the development of the expatriate sub-culture and consequent minimal language learning may be fear of anomie, a problem comparable to marginality. If it can be shown by further study that behavior in the two expatriate communities also occurs in many other such communities, a functional reason could be given for limited linguistic acculturation in cases of temporary culture contact.

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"DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?":

RESISTANCE TO LINGUISTIC ACCULTURATION

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"Do You Speak English?":
Resistance to Linguistic Acculturation¹

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Languages, communities, and individuals accommodate to culture contact in various ways: languages, by borrowing and pidginizing; speech communities, by compartmentalizing certain codes; and individuals, by losing languages and learning new ones--to mention a few adaptive measures scholars have found. Which type of language change occurs in a specific case of culture contact is influenced by such factors as demographic aspects of the contact situation (Sankoff, 1977); the nature of the conjunctive relations between groups (Reinecke, 1970); the cultural processes activated by the contact (Kernan, Sodergren, and French, 1977); and various aspects of the cultural systems in contact, such as their boundary maintaining mechanisms (Dozier, 1964).

Sometimes, as Fishman (1977) notes, culture contact produces very limited linguistic change. One case is expatriate Americans, infamous for not learning the language of their hosts, or not learning it very well. Of course, some Americans living overseas do learn the local language: foreign service officers, missionaries, linguists and other scholars usually study language and culture before going abroad and some continue study during their stay. By contrast, American

business people and their families generally learn relatively little language and culture of the countries to which they are assigned. This paper offers an account of the American expatriate case of limited linguistic accommodation.

The distinction between those who learn the language and those who do not can be explained partially in terms of individuals' reasons for residence abroad. As a rule, expatriates learn only the language they need for contacts with host country nationals, as might be expected since, as Fishman observes (1977), few people learn languages they do not need to speak. Those whose work requires them to communicate in the indigenous language need excellent control of it, though individual repertoires vary with the nature of the talk they do. Typically, anthropologists and diplomats engage in different speech events. The agricultural missionary may need to be fluent for advising farmers on growing new crops, but the oil company geophysicist may need only a few words of the local language simply because s/he works only with other Americans and has few contacts with host country nationals outside work.

A little recognized but perhaps even more powerful influence on language learning is the strictures imposed by the rules of the expatriate community. My evidence comes from two "oil communities" (enclaves of oil business employees and their families) where I had the opportunity

to live: Tripoli, Libya, from 1965 through 1971; and Medan (Sumatra), Indonesia, during 1972 and 1973. I believe that expatriate language behavior can best be explained by the view that long-term expatriates constitute a sub-culture of American society, and that the sub-culture has rules which govern members' linguistic accommodation to their surroundings. Business people are not lazier or less proficient at learning languages than their diplomatic, scholar or missionary counterparts; the rules of the sub-culture, to which both language learners and non-learners belong, require different approaches to linguistic interaction. The rules of the sub-culture effectively limit the degree to which each member learns the local language. In this paper, I will describe certain language use patterns in this sub-culture. Then I will argue that an important driving force for the development of such a sub-culture is the fear of anomie.

Indications that expatriate Americans are a sub-culture of Americans come from several sources. A Carnegie Foundation study (Cleveland, Mangone, and Adams, 1960) of expatriate living found that Americans residing abroad share certain personality characteristics. Usual motivations for seeking expatriate work are a sense of vocation, the lure of greater financial rewards and/or a desire to escape uncongenial surroundings at home. Reasons for remaining abroad are

closely related: love of the exotic; freedom and variety as the spice of life; good salaries; a sense of superiority, both to the locals and to Americans living in America; and a sense of service. Drawbacks to expatriate life are the experience of culture shock ("The feeling of inadequacy that results from not knowing quite how to act among strangers who themselves seem to know just how to act" (p. 20)), fear of disease, and worry about children's schooling.

Expatriate Americans relate to the local environment in patterned ways. Rather than learning the language and culture of the host country, Americans in Tripoli and Medan learned the American community's interpretation of that language and culture. They consulted each other on what restaurants to eat in, what cultural descriptions to read, what indigenous arts and crafts to buy, how to avoid being overcharged for goods and services, and where to travel inside the country.

An important and salient organizing factor in the subculture is that residence abroad is always temporary. Expatriates are not immigrants but migrants, assigned by employers to a country, in some cases for a specified period, in many others for an indefinite time. Some companies hire by time-limited contract and repatriate employees when their work is finished. Others transfer employees from country to country throughout their tenure. The U.S. State Department

posts diplomats for two years with the option to extend for another two years, then transfers them to another post or back to Washington for two years. Major oil companies assign employees for an unspecified time, usually at least two years, sometimes up to twenty. As needs change in various exploration and production locations around the world, employees are transferred. Sometimes employees are transferred back to the U.S. for a time.

This impermanent residence in any one locale distinguishes expatriates from many Americans living in America, who, though they are statistically apt to move (Leslie, 1976), consider themselves settled in their homes. By contrast, expatriate Americans consider themselves sojourners in a particular country, a view reinforced by host country governments who issue them residence and work permits for a limited time.

For individuals, continuity and stability in the face of this impermanence derives from business affiliation and membership in the expatriate sub-culture. Although each transfer means another country with a strange language and culture, it also means another expatriate community with a familiar language, culture, and society.²

Expatriate communities duplicate communities in the U.S. as nearly as possible by creating distinctly American alternatives to local institutions. The size of the expatriate community affects both the number of institutions it can

support and the degree to which they resemble their American models. Since the Tripoli "oil community" numbered around ten thousand Americans at the height of the Libyan oil boom, it supported more institutions than did the Medan community of only two hundred Americans. Both, however, had formed and continued to support private schools, which also functioned as physical and symbolic community centers; Protestant and Catholic churches; sports programs, and many other special interest groups. The importance of these institutions for mother tongue maintenance and local language resistance is that only English is appropriate to participation.³ Therefore, expatriate institutions, even though they are imperfect approximations of their U.S. equivalents, provide continuity because they are linguistically and culturally familiar to Americans.

Contact with host country nationals and the language used for it was governed by sub-cultural norms. In Tripoli, social contact between Libyans and Americans was rare, partly because of cultural differences in gender roles. American social life included couples and families. In contrast, Libyan women did not participate in social life outside the family; and Libyan men socialized outside the family only with other men.⁴ In Medan, on the other hand, social contacts with Indonesians were more frequent, perhaps because of the openness (Bee, 1974) of the local culture, the role of

Indonesian women in their own culture as co-participants in social life, and the small size of the expatriate community. Nonetheless, Americans usually became acquainted with Indonesians who made themselves available to contact through work with foreign companies or with the American or Indonesian governments. Consequently, Americans knew a sub-group of Indonesians, and their concept of an Indonesian personality tended to feed itself. Social contacts in both countries were carried out in Standard English except in cases where Americans' positions required them to be fluent in the local language.

Business contacts between Americans and host country nationals were the most frequent kind of contact. In Tripoli, Americans spoke standard English with Libyan workers of equal status. In the desert drilling camps, American field hands communicated with Libyans in a simplified English sprinkled with a few Arabic words and phrases--what Ferguson (1971) calls "foreigner talk," a sort of incipient pidgin,⁵ fixed to the extent that Americans assigned to various desert locations could communicate with Libyan workers wherever they went. Although this language variety was an adaptation to culture contact, certain words and phrases were brought home to Tripoli, incorporated into family language, and carried to school. Phrases such as mal ish (never mind) were common in classrooms of the American school and among Americans generally. Most of the borrowings named things and concepts

peculiar to Libya, but some English terms were replaced by Arabic; for example, Arabic bakshish (tip) replaced English bribe even though their semantic domains are not identical.

Americans did not become fluent in Arabic. Few adult Americans in Tripoli studied Arabic while they lived there, although children studied it at school by law. Companies employed Arabic language specialists for government negotiations, but for most Americans, linguistic acculturation was limited to a functional pidgin, including social norms for its use which depended on the status of the Libyan addressee: for example, within oil companies, guards and janitors were greeted in Arabic, but further talk was in pidginized English. Higher level employees--secretaries, clerks, and professional workers--were addressed in standard English. Learning who expected standard English and who did not was part of the acculturation to the local expatriate community which occurred when Americans arrived in the country. Using an inappropriate level of English to a Libyan insulted the Libyan and marked the American as incompletely acculturated to the local American sub-culture.

Commercial contacts in Tripoli--buying food, clothes, crafts--were handled by women in pidginized English, or sometimes in Italian, the language of the former colonists. Experienced speakers passed on the "pidgin" to newcomers. Innovation for buying food and supervising servants contributed

to cross-speaker variation; however, individuals developed stable lects for these crucial contacts.

In Medan, on the other hand, culture contact and language change followed different patterns. Virtually all adult Americans studied Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), some for a few months, some for the duration of their stay. There, too, business communication was in English, except that lower level employees--drivers and janitors--could not be presumed to know any English. Consequently, all Americans had to learn some Indonesian. The greatest pressure for the language came from servants because they lived in the household and they did not speak English. Employers had to learn enough Indonesian to express instructions.

While Americans in Medan did less direct buying than in Tripoli, since servants went to the market for food that was not imported, buying anything was nearly impossible if one did not speak Indonesian unless one dealt entirely with Chinese, many of whom did speak English. But, realizing their advantage, English speaking sellers charged high prices, another motivation for Americans to learn Indonesian.

Although virtually all Americans studied Indonesian, it was unusual for them to achieve fluency. Many had extensive vocabularies which they plugged into English syntax, a practice that works better in Bahasa Indonesia than it does for some other languages. A new language, made official in

1945, Bahasa Indonesia developed from an areal lingua franca, and is still being standardized under language planning efforts. Its syntax is somewhat variable, subject to influences from vernacular Indonesian and other languages (Alisjahbana, 1976). Since the low variety (Ferguson, 1959) deletes many verb inflections, Americans who did not master inflections could be understood even though they were violating appropriateness conditions requiring high status speakers to use the refined variety. Those who did not study the language or use it in their work lacked adequate models since their most frequent interlocutors were Javanese servants who were less than fluent in Bahasa Indonesia. These influences on variation in language and language use combined with other conditions to disfavor fluent language learning.

Linguistic accommodation by Americans in the two communities was limited to learning a pidginized language, each uniquely appropriate to features of expatriate existence in the two locales. Fluency in the local language was not valued because it was unnecessary for obligatory contacts with host country nationals. In fact, those who exceeded the limits on language learning were regarded as having violated group norms and threatening to "go native."

Differences in the influence of the local language on the contact language appear to have several sources. On the one hand, the degree to which the language is English mirrors the degree to which the community is American. The large

Tripoli community was able to support a substantial American institutional infrastructure which was a crucial source of group unity. The contact language used there was close to standard English. Medan's expatriate institutions were fewer and more international than American, simply because the expatriate community there was much smaller and Americans a bare majority in it. The contact language Americans used in that less American community, while English based, had almost no English lexicon.

Another source of the difference between the two language varieties was in the local culture. In Tripoli Americans did not need to speak Arabic at all because all their interlocutors spoke some English; but in Indonesia, Americans needed to speak Indonesian in one crucial domain: with servants. This contact was essentially obligatory. Expectations of both the expatriate community and the Indonesian society in which it was embedded were that all expatriate households would hire at least two Indonesian servants, one of whom would live with the family.⁶ Since servants did not speak English, Americans needed to speak Indonesian.

The feature common to both the Tripoli and Medan communities is the presence of observable limits on the degree of linguistic acculturation in both. While the limits are not the same in the two communities--expatriates typically acquired a much larger vocabulary in Bahasa Indonesia, for

example--there are distinct limits in both.

A model of linguistic acculturation is useful for understanding how these limits constrain language learning. In a study of Finns in the U.S., Frances Karttunen found that linguistic acculturation proceeded through three stages: first, vocabulary was replaced; then phonology; and finally syntax. When the target is resistance to acculturation, sub-cultural norms permit members to enter each stage but not to proceed beyond a level of functional competence, however that is locally defined. The later the stage, the lower the level of expertise permitted: members may learn a fair amount of lexicon but little syntax of the local language. Therefore, the language variety which sub-cultural norms allow is restricted to a pidgin.

One account for this pattern of language learning derives from the notion that expatriate Americans "fail" to learn the language and culture of their hosts--because they are ethnocentric or lazy or because Americans pay lip service to the value of studying languages but don't learn to speak them. Furthermore as speakers of English, a world language (Fishman, 1977), Americans do not have a compelling reason to learn other languages, particularly languages of the third world where they live briefly and temporarily. Local social patterns may well call for them to use English almost exclusively if that is a contact language of the country to which they are assigned.⁷

While these factors help explain the lack of language learning, they do not explain why language learning that exceeds job requirements is negatively sanctioned in the expatriate community. A theory that accounts for failure to learn language would have to predict that language learning counts as success. If it does, it is a personal success only; the social consequence is criticism and ostracism by community members.

I believe that the impetus for the development of the expatriate sub-culture is fear of anomie, the sensation of having no culture at all (Merton, cited in Clinard, 1964). A consequence of the expatriate's limited participation in the life of two cultures--home-country and host-country--is a feeling of being in cultural limbo. What is present, even though it becomes familiar, does not feel comfortable; what once felt comfortable is gone, removed in space but also in time and so unrecoverable.

The expatriate's problem is comparable to that of what Park (1929) called the "marginal" man or woman, living at the fringes of two cultures, never integrated fully into either. One cause of marginality is mobility. Studies show that people who change residence go through stages of separation from the old environment and commitment to a new one (Jacobson, 1963; Wofsey, Rierdon, and Wapner, 1979). Transition to a new home is complete with commitment to the new environment, identified as having no plans for

leaving. According to this definition, expatriate Americans are always in transition since the terms of their employment preclude their settling permanently in any of the countries to which they are assigned. Those who move from country to country, never fully committing to any one because they know they will move on, spend all their working years in transition.

Commitment is further discouraged by the nature of the relationship expatriates have with the host country culture. Although they live in the country, they are excluded from full membership because they are culturally different. Contrasts between American culture and host country culture constantly remind expatriates that they are alien. Sources of contrast range from macro-level organizing principles of society, like gender role and the relationship between religion and state, to details below conscious awareness, like contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1978) and conversational style (Tannen, 1979) in communication. The fact of culture contrast eventually becomes familiar, but instances of contrast do not cease to jar. Consequently, the expatriate's experience in the host country is full of surprise, obscured understanding, and resulting stress.

The sensation of anomie is also related to physical separation from the familiar cultural context. While a short-term expatriate may suffer only mild culture shock on returning to the U.S., s/he readjusts quickly through resuming

interaction with family and friends, and professional affiliation. The long-term expatriate, however, has primary friendships and professional affiliation abroad; family ties endure, but others dissolve or alter so that vacation contacts seem either disjointed or aborted. Thus, participation in the home culture during a yearly vacation takes on some of the feeling of alienation characteristic of contact with the foreign culture.

Living outside the U.S., expatriate Americans have neither the option of participating in American culture nor that of membership in the local culture. The expatriate sub-culture is their alternative to anomie. If they do not affiliate, they will be isolated; if they do, they will have to follow the rules. They will have to learn the contact language, not the local language. People who break the rules by learning the local language signal their desire for ties to the other culture and invite sanction. Cases reported to me include peer-rejection, gossip, and scapegoating.

I believe the patterns I have described underlie language behavior in other expatriate communities even though surface phenomena varies. If study confirms my findings, we will have a functional reason for limited linguistic acculturation in cases of temporary culture contact. This type of investigation raises some questions about how best to train prospective expatriates. What specific communicative contexts will they surely encounter in their foreign locations? What will they need to know to function effectively in these contexts?

Notes

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²A new community often includes friends and acquaintances from a previous assignment, another source of continuity.

Although the sub-culture is discontinuous, represented in many countries, membership is continuous. It may endure after repatriation. Richard Bauman reports (personal communication) that in Austin, Texas, children who have lived abroad are a special group, "oil kids."

³Fishman (1966) points out that major studies, including work by Weinreich, Haugen and Mackey, find institutions one of the most important factors promoting language maintenance.

⁴A notable exception was a Libyan businessman who had become wealthy as a result of discovering what materials were crucial for oil companies' earliest business in Libya and providing them. Many Americans knew this man socially.

⁵Precisely what metalinguistic term to apply to the language varieties discussed here is a problem. I am grateful to William Samarin for pointing out to me that they may be better called jargons than pidgins since at least the variety used in Tripoli is basically English with a few borrowings. Since both language varieties exhibit syntactic simplification as well as lexical pooling from two languages, I will skirt the issue by calling them pidginized varieties and "pidgins," pending a careful analysis of their structures.

⁶The practice traces to the Indonesian pattern of providing support to poor relatives in return for services. Reasons that Indonesian servants did not learn English may derive partly from Indonesia's linguistic history. Culture contact has been constant among the island nation's ethnic groups; with traders from other southeast Asian countries and European nations from the days of the spice trade; and more recently with Dutch colonists (who forbade their servants to speak Dutch) and the Japanese occupation. The language of all these contacts has been the pidgin ancestor of Bahasa Indonesia (Alisjahbana, 1976).

⁷Muriel Saville-Troike has suggested (personal communication) that these local expectations may be distancing measures.

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